

The New York Times**January 17, 2010**

EDITORIAL

Walking the Walk on School Reform

The American Federation of Teachers, the second-largest teachers' union, has been working hard to distance itself from its competitor, the National Education Association, which tends to resist sensible reforms.

The federation's president, Randi Weingarten, set the contrast quite effectively with a speech last week in Washington, in which she offered a proposal to reform teacher evaluation. She not only echoed Education Secretary Arne Duncan's call for evaluation systems that take student achievement into account but also expressed support for "a fair, transparent and expedient process to identify and deal with ineffective teachers."

The shortcomings of evaluations were laid out last year in an eye-opening study by a New York research group, the New Teacher Project. Where they can be said to exist at all, evaluations are typically short, pro forma and almost universally positive. Poorly trained evaluators visit the classroom once or twice for observations that last for a total of an hour or less. Nearly every teacher passes and the overwhelming majority of teachers receive top ratings. Yet more than half the teachers surveyed said they knew a tenured teacher who deserved to be dismissed for poor performance.

The process shortchanges students, who are saddled with ineffective teachers. It also hurts the careers of the talented beginners who rarely get the help and guidance they need to become master teachers.

Ms. Weingarten called for a new collaboration between schools and unions that would replace this "perfunctory waste of time." She called on the states to adopt basic professional teaching standards that would spell out what teachers should know and be able to do.

She rightly warned against using test scores in crude, statistically invalid ways, and proposed a sophisticated analysis to determine if students were showing real growth under a given teacher. Just as important, Ms. Weingarten said districts that so often take a sink-or-swim approach to teaching should develop support and mentoring programs that both improve teachers' abilities and keep them from leaving the profession.

These proposals should help to change the national conversation on the subject by putting pressure on the N.E.A. At the same time, critics of unions who are pleased to see Ms. Weingarten talk the talk will be watching closely in the coming months to see if she walks the walk.

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